Communion Meditation
John 3:16: 17:13-23
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WB 4A

The story is told of an incident that took place in a low income neighborhood in New York City during a census. The hour was late: the census taker was very tired: as she talked with a woman in the last apartment of the last building for the day she became a little exasperated at the discovery that there were twelve children in this particular family. "What are their ages?" she asked the mother. And the mother pausing and scratching her head - as we all do when someone asks our children's ages - began: "Let's see: Billy is eight months: Marie is - two years: Kim - 3½." The worker interupted her sharply: "no names - just ages." To which the mother responded - "But, all my children have names."

That mother, I would suggest, was saying something very important: something that needs saying today - "All my children have names" - all of God's children have names. In that sense she becomes, for me, an eloquent spokesman for the event we celebrate today - World Communion. For that is what the idea of World Communion is all about: all the children: all the men and women: have names.

Coming at it from another direction, George Stevens, in an article in Saturday Review, under the title, "Above and Beyond Capital Punishment", [S.R. 9/25/71] lifts up some interesting incongruities in the changing public mind on the topic of executing criminals. The growing sentiment against capital punishment, Mr. Stevens suggests, is not really a result of a great rennaisance of humanitarian sentiment. Rather, it is occurring because the legal processes now allow a man sentenced to death to postpone his demise for years: and that during that time television, radio and the newspapers bring him into our living rooms. That is to say, he becomes an individual: we begin to know him: what he looks like: how he thinks and feels: we begin to see him in the context of other human relationships. Suddenly he becomes

a father, or a son, or a lawyer, or a poet. Now, it's one thing for our society to execute a murderer - or a rapist. But it's another thing altogether for it to execute someone we know: an individual - a real, live person we've seen and read about. In Stevens' words: ". . . if a convicted criminal - a Caryl Chessman - manages to stay alive long enough after the death sentence to make an impression on the public as an individual, he arouses a sense of guilt in the public mind. This development usually leads to a clamor in the criminal's favor or at least to intensified pressure against the death penalty."

Thus we have the irony of people talking in terms of a "tolerable level" of casualties in Viet Nam - and at the same time the intolerability of a handful of men waiting execution on our prisons. Now lest you misunderstand: I am opposed to capital punishment - on moral and sociological grounds. I don't think it's right: and I don't think it works. But that's not the point. The point is that we will tolerate the extermination of human beings so long as we don't know who they are. But when they become individuals - when all the children come to have names - our attitudes and opinions change rapidly - and radically. And that, it seems to me, is ~~the~~ a priority item on the agenda ~~on World Communion Sunday~~ American Society. To see that all men are individuals: that all men belong to the same father: that there is a built-in unity in the human situation: to see all of that and then to celebrate our own individuality - and the individuality of each other - around a table bearing the name of the soverign Lord of all men - the table of Jesus Christ.

As Christians, however, I think we need to be as clear as possible in our ~~theology~~ thinking at this point. Vague ideas such as "the human family" or the "unity of mankind" don't help very much. We need to build our base a little more soundly than that. The unity of mankind is not an isolated concept - rather it is a conclusion we draw from the fundamental ~~Christian~~ Judeo-Christian idea, namely, that God loves: that God loves all men: that his love for all men - deposits all of us into a new situation in which every other man becomes a relative - a brother - an individual. The great German churchman, Martin Niemoller put it

this way: "It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of His enemies."

When we think about the unity of mankind deriving from the love of God we are dealing with deep concepts: the practical implications of which sometimes ellude us because of their depth. And so we turn to symbolism: to Symbols that summarize and demonstrate. The idea of God's love is best described, then, not in the language of philosophy - but in a picture, an act, a person. The cross of Jesus Christ is the meaning of God's love.

But still it can be illusive. Granted, it is impossible to confront the reality of Jesus Christ dying out of love for me without being moved: yet it is possible to keep that too in the realm of ideas. And so to deal with God's love we have to bring it into that context we know about - our own lives. That is to say, the idea of God's love becomes a reality for us when we see the ethical imperatives it carries with it. A loving God and a human family are sterile ideas - until they begin to influence the way we behave in relationship with other men. I can't improve on the way the author of the First Epistle of John put it: "If a man says that he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar."

Anybody will agree to loving mankind - so long as mankind remains an amorphous mass out there somewhere. The crunch comes - the ethical crunch - when all the children come to have names: when mankind becomes that particular man.

The late Martin Luther King, in one of his sermons, had a good grip on the issue when he said: "We should be happy that Jesus did not order us to like our enemies. It is almost impossible to like some people. Like is a sentimental and affectionate word. How can we like a person whose avowed aim is to crush our very being? How can we be affectionate toward a person who is threatening our children and bombing our homes? This is impossible. But Jesus realized that love is greater than like." And Martin Buber, famous

Jewish theologian: "You cannot command that one feel love for a person, but only that he deal lovingly with him."

So, when we talk about the love of God and the love of men for each other and the human family, we're not talking about some syrupy, affectionate, liking. That's not it at all. We're talking here about something far deeper and far more important than that. I've been helped by the ideas of Rollo May in his book "Love and Will". May suggests that the ability to love another person depends totally on the ability to feel care for him. And he defines "caring" as . . "a recognition of another, a fellow human being like one's self; . . identification of oneself with the joy and pain of the other: guilt, pity, and the awareness that we all stand on the base of a common humanity from which we all stem."

To care for and about another human being: to give him a name: to identify with him: to see life through his eyes: to put on his shoes and try walking in them for a minute. We can do that. That's what love means. When God wanted to tell men that he loved them - he didn't write a poem, or construct a philosophy - he identified with men in the world. He came among us, we believe, in Jesus Christ. He saw life through our eyes: he put on our shoes and walked with us: he shared our joys and burdens: and he even died our death. That says - "I love you." And it is to that - that kind of identification with each other: that caring love - it is to that - you and I are called. - include prayer

World Communion Sunday. Millions of people out there somewhere, hearing the same words, breaking bread and sharing a cup. People of every race, every nationality, rich - poor, old - young: people in India and Great Britain and Venezuela - but also people in Central Presbyterian, and Grace Methodist and Trinity Lutheran. They all have names. Each of them is a person, a child of God, one he loves and because of that they become our brothers and sisters. As you commune this morning think about them.

Think about the fact that you have a name: that God loves you: celebrate that good news.

Think about the one sitting next to you - the one you turn to and offer the peace of Jesus Christ in a few minutes. Celebrate the good news that he is part of the family too.

On the night he was arrested Jesus prayed - "May they all be one." May we, here this morning - be one.

Amen.

Our father, ~~as we come to the table of our Lord this morning~~, all ~~each~~ of us ~~brings~~ have feelings and hurts and hopes. ~~Each~~ All of us ~~brings~~ have relationships with others that need to be repaired and renewed. ~~As we commune~~ - help us to care. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.